

# **Moral Character: It's Origin And Difference**

**Freewill Baptist Quarterly**

# **MORAL CHARACTER -- ITS ORIGIN AND DIFFERENCE.**

## **FREEWILL BAPTIST QUARTERLY.**

ART. I. -- NO. XXXII. --OCTOBER, 1860.

None but a moral agent can possess a moral character. Of no other species of being can moral qualities be truly, or rationally affirmed. There is no moral standard, no law, rule, nor criterion, applicable to any other.

A stone, a tree, an irrational animal, can have no moral character; simply because they have not the attributes essential to moral agency, and are therefore not under moral law. To predicate moral character of a being who is not a moral agent, is like affirming that virtue is square, round, or triangular; or that vice weighs so many pounds avoirdupois.[?]

It is imputing an attribute, which, from the very nature of the subject, is impossible to it.

But every moral agent has a moral character; though all have not the same moral character.

The difference in moral character divides moral agents into two widely different classes, viz: the Righteous, and the Wicked. That there is a difference in moral character between the righteous and the wicked, none will deny, who admit moral obligation, or a distinction between right and wrong. That this difference is not superficial, nominal, nor merely seeming, but real, and fundamental, must be admitted by all who acknowledge a difference in principle, between virtue and vice, right and wrong. A true apprehension of the qualities of character, which constitute this difference, is essential to a true knowledge of our own character, or a just estimate of the character of others.

The fact that responsibility attaches to moral character, indeed that it pertains to nothing else, is not only a scriptural truth, but an affirmation of reason as well; and must be admitted by all who have any true conception of moral character.

This fact naturally suggests, as it necessarily indicates, the answer to the inquiry: "What is the responsible origin, and who is the responsible

author, of moral character?"

The question is not only pertinent, but immeasurably important, "From whence arises the difference of character in moral agents?"

This article will be devoted to the consideration of these two questions:

## **I. WHAT IS THE RESPONSIBLE ORIGIN OF MORAL CHARACTER?**

## **II. IN WHAT DOES THE ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CHARACTER OF THE RIGHTEOUS AND THAT OF THE WICKED CONSIST?**

**I. What is the responsible origin of moral character? Involved in the general subject of these inquiries, and essential to their true solution, are the correlated questions:--**

1. How does any being become a Sinner?
2. How does any being become Righteous? Theologians and philosophers have written and speculated much upon the "origin of moral evil."

The question of the origin of moral good, involves precisely the same philosophical and rational principles of responsibility. This, we shall see is a truth of both reason and revelation.

1. How does any being become a sinner?

He becomes a sinner by sinning. Whatever sin may be, every sinner becomes a sinner by committing it. The Scriptures give no intimation of any other way of becoming a sinner,-- actual or possible. Reason neither affirms, nor admits, any other. Sin being "the transgression of the law," every sinner becomes such by, and only by, transgressing the Divine law. Thus the first sinner became so; thus the second; and thus every succeeding one.

## 2. How does any being become righteous?

The term "righteous" in the inquiry, denotes the quality of moral character, not the relation of the pardoned sinner to the law, denominated evangelical justification. Moral agents become righteous in moral character by obedience to the law of righteousness to which they are accountable, rendering a sincere obedience to the present demand which the Divine requirement makes of a moral agent;--the moral character of the first act of obedience as well as of every other is righteous; and in rendering it the agent comes to possess a present righteous moral state or character.

If the law of righteousness required simply external acts, then external works would be all that would be necessary to righteousness. But the Divine law requires primarily a right purpose or intention; and, therefore, no act can be morally right nor accepted as obedience, that does not spring from a right intention. The intention not only gives birth to the external act, but it gives character to it. As the ultimate intention is morally right, or morally wrong, so is every act to which that intention gives existence. This is why "faith," being the first act of obedience, "is imputed for righteousness." The ultimate intention implied in faith, as a virtue or morally right act, must necessarily produce works of righteousness, as it is itself righteous. Faith must be obedience to the law of Christ, or unbelief would not be sin. "For sin is the transgression of the law."

The obedience in which a moral agent becomes righteous in present character, must, from the nature of the case, at the first, be purely mental;--an act of the mind, a purpose or intention of the heart; a choice of the will. The "intent of the heart," and the ultimate intention of the will, are identical. Obedience of heart must exist before obedience of life can exist, for the former gives birth to the latter. We can only show that inward

obedience by our outward acts. But "God, who knoweth the heart, bears witness," reckons it as obedience, and "imputes it as righteousness."

But this obedience of heart, will, nay, necessarily must, produce outward obedience, in conformity with its own character, as light and opportunity are afforded. The ultimate intention of the heart gives moral character to every thought, volition and act that possesses a moral character, in a moral agent.

If external obedience is not rendered, when opportunity is afforded and duty apprehended, we are bound to conclude that there is no obedience of heart; that the "heart is not right with God." The ultimate intention is not such as God requires. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them:" Matt. 7:18-20. The allusion to a tree and its fruit, as illustrating moral character and conduct, by no means indicates, as some have interpreted it, that the character of men is as unchangeable as the nature of a tree, but that the outward life and conduct necessarily result from the inward character,--the inward principle or purpose of the heart. The fact that the character of men may change, not only from sin to righteousness, but from righteousness to sin, is not only clearly affirmed in the Scriptures, and painfully illustrated in the sin and apostasy which sacred history has chronicled, but is illustrated by this very figure of a tree and its fruit.

God declares that those that he "had planted a noble vine, wholly a right seed," were "turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine," "brought forth wild grapes," or, as Lowth translates, "poisonous berries:" Isa. 5:2; Jere. 2:21.

But if the moral character originates in the choice of the heart,--in supreme, or ultimate intention, and if the acts and whatever possesses moral character, derive that character from the intention of the heart of which they are the fruit; who is the author, and what is the responsible origin, or cause, of that intention? Is this ruling choice of the heart, this ultimate intention of the Will, free or necessitated? Is it what it is, because the agent had not power to choose otherwise? Or had he actually ability to choose the opposite of what he did choose?

We affirm that, in this choice, men are not, and never were, necessitated to choose as they do. No law of necessity makes their choice what it is,

and renders the opposite choice impossible to them. If their choice were a necessity, it would lack entirely the essential qualities of moral character. A necessitated act cannot be a responsible one, and consequently can possess no moral character. That the acts of an agent might be necessitated by Almighty coercion, is not denied; but that the agent thus necessitated would be responsible for that choice or act, is an infinite absurdity, contradicting every intuition of the reason that God has given us, and outraging every principle of justice which he has revealed. The responsibility would rest on the cause that necessitated the choice or act. The moral character of the act belongs to the author necessitating, and not to the instrument necessitated. The latter becomes but the irresponsible instrument of another's will. That will is the real, and only responsible, cause of the act. The real author is he who has irresistibly produced the act in question, by an irresistible influence, which there is no power, and consequently no obligation, to resist.

To transfer the moral responsibility from this real author to the necessitated agent, is not only an act of gross injustice, but confounds and obliterates all just ideas of responsibility, moral obligation and moral character.

The argument that an agent, whose choices were necessitated, would be responsible, because he "acts according to his choice," "does as he wills to do," &c., is the sheerest sophistry. It derives all its plausibility from the very fact which it denies. It is true that the mind is ready to assent to the proposition that a man is responsible because he does as he chooses. But there is a truth which it intuitively assumes in this assent, without which, its assent would not be given; viz: that he is responsible for his choice. If he had no responsibility in this, he would have none for the act which that choice produces. The mind assumes that he is responsible for his choice, on the ground that his choice is free, and not necessitated. Consciousness affirms this, as it does our existence and personality. We are as conscious of one as of the other. It is on the ground of this consciousness of the freedom of the will, that the mind so readily assents to the proposition, that men are morally responsible for doing as they will to do. Take this truth away, and the attempt to fix responsibility upon the act which it only possessed on the tacit assumption of that truth, and the argument is false and fraudulent.

Let the mind but really believe that the will is no more free in its intentions

and determinations than a stone is in falling, and the mind can no more rationally affirm responsibility for acts resulting from such necessary choice, than of the falling of a stone.

With the honest conviction, (if it could exist,) that the choices of the will--the intentions of the heart--are produced by a law of necessity, as the fruit of a tree is necessitated to be what it is, and we must rationally affirm that there is no more responsibility in the one, than in the other. Accountability, responsibility, moral character, all cease where necessity begins. But though the choices and intentions in which moral character originates and inheres, cannot be necessitated; though the will in acts involving moral character cannot be coerced, it can be influenced. This does not in the least interfere with moral accountability. For these influences, however potent, are not irresistible.

Moral agents can resist them: they can yield to them. In the sovereign power of a free will to decide whether to follow or refuse, the ground of responsibility is found. There are influences to lead to sin; there are influences to lead to righteousness, appealing to every mind.

Amongst those leading to sin, the Scriptures reckon the world, the flesh, and the devil.

From these arise innumerable temptations to the senses, to the imagination, the natural appetites and passions, to excite desire, and lead to selfish and sinful gratification. These temptations are not sin in the tempted. It is only by voluntarily yielding to them that he sins. "Lust, when it hath conceived, bringeth forth sin." But it can never conceive and bring forth, but by the consent of the heart,--the voluntary concurrence of the will. These natural appetites, and faculties of the soul and body, are not sin; and if they were, would not be the sin of the agent in whom they exist; for he is not their author and has no responsibility for their existence. Our Saviour had the appetites and faculties of human nature, was "made in all things like unto his brethren." He "was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin." Heb. 4:15.

The influences that lead men to righteousness are in the Scriptures summarily included in the expression, "the grace of God." Paul declares, "by the grace of God I am What I am." "By grace are ye saved." Under this term is included the word and spirit, and all the influences of the gospel system of salvation. It is through these influences that men are

"born again;" "regenerated;" "born from above;" "renewed;" "purified;" "washed;" "sanctified." They are "born of God;" "born of water and of the Spirit;" "begotten with the word of truth;" cleansed "by the washing of water by the word;" saved "by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost;" made "clean through the word;" "sanctified through the truth."

All these expressions refer to the same change, attributing it to God, to the Spirit, to the word, etc. It is a moral, not a physical change, and is effected by moral and not physical power. It is a change of moral character, effected by moral influences. These influences are no more irresistible than the evil influences that lead to a wicked choice and character.

Men can resist temptation; they can resist the devil; and they can resist God and his Spirit. The martyr Stephen declared to the Jews, "ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." His influence is not, then, irresistible; if it were, he could not be resisted. But these stiff-necked Jews did resist, to their own destruction. These influences cannot be irresistible; if they were, the result of them could not be moral character. Such influence would preclude the idea of moral responsibility. It is not by compulsion or necessity that men are regenerated or made righteous. It is through influencing the voluntary, moral choice of the heart aright, that this change is effected. The heart is changed by these influences from transgression to obedience; from rebellion to submission; from unbelief to confidence and trust; from impenitence to repentance; from enmity to love; from the flesh to the Spirit; from a selfish, wrong, ultimate intention, to a benevolent and right ultimate intention; from Satan to God. This is what is intended by "a change of heart," "a new heart," &c. It is a change of moral character; and therefore, while it is the effect of the influence of the word and Spirit of God, it involves no less the free exercise of man's voluntary powers. God influences freely, and the sinner as freely yields to those influences, while having the absolute power of free will to do otherwise.

The great facts of regeneration are summarily set forth by the apostle, in referring his brethren to their conversion, thus: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit." This was how they came to be "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever." 1 Pet. 1: 22, 23.



Thus we see how it is that God purifies the convert, and yet the convert "purifies himself;" how God "gives him a new heart;" and how he "makes to himself a new heart." We see how Christ in his exaltation "gives repentance," and yet the sinner voluntarily repents; how Christ "is the author and finisher of our faith," and yet we believe with the heart unto righteousness.

The Holy Spirit is the great influencing agent; the truth or word is the great instrument; but the man himself is the sole responsible agent. The Spirit and the word appeal to and influence men, as free, intelligent, responsible agents; not as machines. No being without intelligence and free will can become holy or righteous in a moral sense.

Every moral agent, whatever influences for good or evil may operate upon his mind, is the responsible author, and his will the responsible origin, of his moral character. On this ground God holds men responsible for their character and conduct. To the sinner belong the guilt and shame of sin, while to God belong honor and praise, for those influences of grace and truth, and love, which, through the Spirit, have drawn, persuaded, influenced, the sinner to turn from his sins to God; as well as for that mercy that pardons and receives the returning prodigal.

All holiness and all sin are alike voluntary. This is true of angels, fallen or unfallen. It was true of the first of the human race, and it will be equally so of the last. Adam and Eve were not necessitated either by God, or their nature, or circumstances, to be holy or obedient. Nor were they necessitated by their nature, or Satan, or anything else, to sin. Each was the responsible originator of his or her moral character and acts. Each of their posterity, who possesses a moral character, is equally responsible for it. The Scriptures nowhere intimate that the first parents of our race had any more power, or freedom of will, or more responsibility for their acts or character, than each of their rational posterity has for his.

Doubtless the influences to sin have been greatly multiplied and aggravated by the introduction of sin into the world. It is equally true that the influences to virtue and holiness, have been greatly increased through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, to counteract those influences to sin. But no one was ever made a sinner by Adam's sin, except by voluntarily yielding to the influences which that sin has introduced into the world. Nor was any one ever made righteous through Christ, without

yielding voluntarily to the influences which he has introduced into the world, to lead men to repentance and obedience.

Thus, and thus only, "as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, even so by the righteousness of one shall many be made righteous." But they are made neither by necessity nor independently of their own free choice and consent of their will. No agency ascribed to God in man's regeneration can be justly so interpreted as to conflict with the truth that every man is justly responsible for his own moral character. This by no means detracts from the glory of God, in the sanctification and salvation of sinners. It surely does not exhibit the love, forbearance, and mercy of God less gloriously, to represent that forbearance and mercy, as exercised towards those who have no excuse for their sins than towards those who could not help sinning. A system of grace that turns men from the ways of death which they have wilfully chosen, by its mighty moral influences of truth and love, cannot be less glorious to God than one that denies free agency, and affirms that men are saved by irresistible power, from a state of necessitated sin. Indeed, on this latter assumption, God could not be just nor righteous in threatening punishment, nor the sinner blameworthy in transgression; there could be no ground for atonement, and pardon would be a mockery of misfortune, instead of the glorious exhibition of forgiving love to the guilty. Guilt would be an empty name without a meaning, and pardon equally so.

Having considered the responsible origin of moral character, we inquire,

## **II. In what does the essential difference between the character of the righteous and the wicked consist?**

1. The righteous supremely regard right. They set right above all motives of expediency, selfish policy, or personal advantage. They set it above all human authority or influence. It is the guiding principle to which they have consecrated themselves, their powers, their life. Where that leads, they will follow. Let it lead to honor or dishonor from men; to fame, or obloquy; to a throne, or a scaffold; to a palace, or a prison; to fortune, or a fiery furnace; to the favor of the great and powerful, or to a den of lions ;--their devotion knows no change and no diminution. The language of their heart is:

"What conscience dictates to be done,  
Or warns me not to do,

This, teach me more than hell to shun,

That, more than heaven pursue."

Their devotion to right is not graduated by its popularity nor its profit. Alone, or with the million; popular, or unpopular; in the ascendant, or crushed to earth; living, or dying;--they stand by it. No threats, no dangers, drive them from it: no flatteries or bribes seduce them to desert or betray it. They lay upon its altar every interest, as the patriarch laid the "child of promise" on the altar on Mount Moriah. But a faithful God watches over those interests, as he did over that child of promise.

The wicked have no such regard for, nor devotion to, right. That many of their outward actions are proper, that they arise from, and are prompted by, kind, tender, generous feelings, is doubtless true. That the ideas of truth, justice, right, honor, honesty and fidelity have some, and often much, influence with them, in their choices and acts, is not disputed. That the specific commands of God, and even a reverential feeling towards him, may influence their lives, is, we think, true of some of them. But they do not set the right, as a principle, above every other motive. In the supreme intention---purpose--choice of their heart, they are not devoted to universal, impartial, unbending right,--above all selfish considerations and personal advantages. There are in their hearts other things, chosen before, and placed higher in their regard, than right. They are glad, when right and self-interest agree in the same course; when duty and pleasure concur; when policy and principle lead in the same direction. But when duty and inclination conflict in some tender point; when dearest personal interests and devotion to unbending right, seem to point in different directions, like the young inquirer after salvation, who went away sorrowful at the sacrifice the Saviour required, they show that "one thing they lack;" and that is supreme devotion to right.

Often it will be found that the life of the wicked is an attempted compromise between absolute universal right, and their conflicting desires, inclinations, and selfish ends. It is a compromise between the principles which the moral law requires, and expediency, or what selfishness dictates. They will be just, honest, upright in their intercourse with men, or at least a large portion of their acquaintance and friends; but

there are generally some deviations from this; or if not, they certainly are not just and upright towards God. They do not give him his due. Of them it might at least be truly said, "Will a man rob God? yet ye have robbed me." They will sometimes, like Herod, "do many things" he requires; but, like Herod, there are other things they will not do; idols that they will not renounce; sins that they will not abandon. This shows that the ultimate intention of their heart is not "impartially willing the highest practicable good of the universe." Consequently none of their choices or acts spring from a right ultimate intention, nor in strictness are morally right, although prompted by kind feeling, and generous instincts. They often deceive themselves by comparing themselves with others, and balancing their good deeds against their bad ones. But it is obvious that their "heart is not right with God;" their supreme governing principle is not devotion to right. In all grades of wickedness, there is this fatal fact, which inscribes Mene Tikel[?] on their character, there is some other motive more influential with them than universal right.

2. The ultimate intention, the supreme governing, subjective motive of the heart of the righteous is the impartial and highest good of being. Self-interest is held secondary to this. The righteous will never knowingly setup their interest against the higher good of the universe.

We do not mean that they can all state the motive and intention of their heart in philosophical language, nor perhaps clearly conceive of the meaning of these terms; but this they know, they will not set up their selfish aims and ends against the general good, and they want to promote, and have promoted, the greatest possible amount of virtue and happiness in the universe.

"The wicked have a selfish ultimate intention. They do not call it selfish, but they set their own interests, as an end, above the general good; above its real perceived worth, in the sum of universal good. They are partial to their own interests, and make their own good the highest object and motive.

3. The righteous love God supremely. They could not be righteous and do otherwise. God is more worthy of love than any other, or all other, beings. He is more deserving of happiness. His blessedness is a greater good than all others, for it is infinite. All this is embraced in the regard of the heart of the righteous to God. Hence they not only desire and will all

blessedness and good to him in their hearts, but they consecrate their mind and strength to him, to honor, serve and obey.

The wicked love self more than God. Indeed, there are multitudes of things they love more than God. If they have loving emotions and feelings towards God, they arise principally from self-love, and the idea that God has benefited or will benefit them. Such feelings are proper; but if this is the highest love they have to God, they really set self above God, and do not love him supremely, but secondarily to themselves. They show that they do not love God supremely, by refusing that consecration to his service and honor and glory demanded in obedience. "This is the love of God that we keep his commandments."

4. The righteous regard the will of God supremely. His requirements are the rule of their life; "the highest law." It is written on their heart. They find indeed another law in their members, warring against the law of their mind. They know that "in their flesh dwelleth no good thing;" but they walk in the Spirit, and so do not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. They "are not in the flesh but in the Spirit." "Christ liveth in them, and the life that they live, they live by the faith of the Son of God." They are "led by the Spirit." The law of God is with them supreme. They love that law. No human law or authority is allowed to turn them from obedience. They "obey God rather than men." They set God's law above all conflicting claims or motives. With the wicked it is not so. There are other things that they regard more. God's will is not their supreme rule of action. They may not all be base enough to sneer at the claims of the law of God as a "higher law" than human laws. They may admit, that all ought to obey it. They may outwardly conform to many of its precepts; but they do not make it the law of their life. It is not written on their hearts, and hence they do not obey it from the heart. They may resolve to, but their resolution is selfish, because their ultimate intention is so. Hence, none truly obey it except through the Spirit, by believingly consecrating themselves to God, and accepting the gospel as their only hope.

5. The Righteous love their neighbor as themselves. It is in their heart to do to others as they would have others do to them. They do not merely try outwardly to do this, but the love of their heart to their neighbor leads them to do it. They will no more countenance a wrong to their neighbor than to themselves. They look upon what is done to others as done to themselves; and upon what is suffered by others as suffered by

themselves. They live not for themselves alone, but to "do good to all men as they have opportunity." They have good will in their hearts to all, and would bless and do all they can to promote their welfare here and hereafter. The wicked do not love their neighbor as themselves. They love their friends, they have kind, tender, generous feelings towards the suffering and afflicted, and perhaps towards men in general. They do many generous and commendable things; and yet their heart does not regard the interests and rights and Welfare of others as their own. Self-interest is first with them. They have not, towards humanity in general, that spirit which the Saviour had, and which his followers derive from him.

6. Both the righteous and the wicked may be religious. The religion of the righteous is a righteous religion. Their faith is a righteous faith, their love a righteous love, their principles righteous principles. They serve God from principle. Their purpose and aim are supremely benevolent towards God and man. In short they "have the spirit of Christ." The religion of the wicked is an unrighteous religion. We do not mean merely that it is imperfect; but that it is fatally defective in principle. It may have much zeal and much feeling, it may have some kind and degree of love. It may have some feelings of fondness and reverence for God. It may have feelings of tenderness and kindness to men. It may clothe itself with all the forms and express itself in all the phrases and tones of sanctity; but its one fatal defect is, that it is built on supreme selfishness. Its one great incentive to action, the chief source of its joys and sorrows, of its anxiety and efforts, of its prayers and exhortations and sacrifices, is self-interest, personal blessedness to self, in this world or the next. As far as it is selfish, so far it is unchrist-like. The righteous desire holiness, happiness, and heaven. Their welfare is a motive for effort, their hope of this a source of strength and joy but all that pertains to self is held as but of secondary importance. In the presence of the claims of God, the glory of his name, and the welfare and happiness of the universe, self takes a secondary place. Not so the wicked; their blessedness, enjoyment and salvation are paramount, supreme, all in all.

In a word, in heart, spirit and principle, the righteous are supremely benevolent; the wicked are supremely selfish. Reader, to which class do you belong?

THE END.